Learning From Recent Challenges in

Education Abroad Crisis Management

ith regard to natural disasters alone, the last three years have presented

an unprecedented challenge to the education abroad community. Consider the following

events that have occurred since 2008: earthquakes in China, Italy, Haiti, Chile, and New

Zealand; flooding in Australia and Brazil; forest fires in Russia; volcanic eruptions in Chile

and Iceland; and the horrific earthquake, tsunami, and subsequent nuclear disaster in Japan.

These incidents, coupled with civil unrest, revolutions,

and regime transitions in North Africa and the

Middle East, have likely exposed some vulnerabilities

and deficiencies in our crisis management plans.

**Hope Is Not a Plan**

Laura Angelone, director of scholastic programs at

International SOS, emphasizes the importance of

drafting even the most basic crisis management principles

to guide your response. The most important

elements of a crisis management plan reflect distinct

phases: awareness, assessment, communication,

decision, action, resolution, and return to normal.

Education abroad offices need not start from scratch

in developing such plans. Institutions of all sizes likely

have a general campus-based emergency plan that

can be adapted to the education abroad context. Insurance

carriers, brokers, and consultants may also

be able to assist with this process. The key is to have

a plan that is adaptable and responsive to a variety

of scenarios, not one that anticipates every possible

emergency. It is also important to frequently review

and revise the plan, especially after an incident, in

order to strengthen its effectiveness.

**Practice Makes Perfect**

Many institutions spend hours creating excellent crisis

management plans, only to see those plans gather

dust on an office bookshelf. The plan that goes untested

is as good as useless. Joseph L. Brockington,

PhD, associate provost for international programs

at Kalamazoo College, is a 20-year veteran of crisis

management in education abroad. In every workshop,

webinar, or article you will hear the same sage

advice: “Drill the plan.” Brockington, known for putting

his staff through the paces at least three times a

year, does not use any prepackaged products or services.

He also does not schedule the drills in advance.

Instead, he takes his cues from real-world events.

“When there’s some juicy international event where

my staff can go out on the Web and get information

to craft a response, I create a drill.” Brockington cited

an example of a drill in which a frantic parent had

called about their student who may have been in the

vicinity of a volcanic eruption during his education

abroad program. In each drill, Brockington assigns

different first responders, so that all the members of

his staff get some experience. “Last time,” he recalled,

“I decided that all the senior staff was at a conference

and assigned the response to a program assistant.”

The drills are not complex, day-long affairs. Instead,

they last about two hours. The first responder is also

required to document the experience so the learning

moments can be shared with other staff members.

**Students Have**

**Minds of Their Own—**

**The Noncompliance Problem**

An effective crisis management plan must also acknowledge

that there will be students who refuse to

act in accordance with your directives. Michigan State

University (MSU) faced a difficult situation when it

decided to evacuate students from Egypt last February.

One of the students who had been interviewed by

her hometown media seeking firsthand observations

of the uprising became their “unofficial” correspondent.

Her newfound celebrity inhibited her ability to

appropriately assess her risks. MSU was unprepared

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to manage the student who refused to leave

once the evacuation plan was in place. To

make matters worse, her parents supported

her decision. Ultimately, the student recognized

the danger of the situation and asked

to be evacuated; however, by this time it

was too late and she lost the benefit. She

then threatened to report to the media that

she had been abandoned by the institution.

Eventually, MSU was able to transfer her to

another program in the region. Following

this event, MSU produced clearly defined,

written consequences for noncompliance to

such directives.

**Communication**

Without a communications plan, a crisis

management plan is wholly ineffective.

“Once a potential crisis breaks,” says Salvatore

N. Moschella, vice president and chief

operating officer for Semester at Sea and

Institute for Shipboard Education, “we are

assessing real and perceived impacts as well

as reviewing contingencies.” Particularly

important for Japan was the expert advice

obtained from staff at the Nuclear Regulatory

Commission and the International

Atomic Energy Commission. “Having this

authoritative information was key in our

decisions and our communications.”

Technology has contributed to a sense

of complacency regarding the collection of

complete program itineraries that include

landline phone numbers, fax numbers, and

street addresses. Linda Langin, senior vice

president, Cultural Insurance Services International

(CISI), states that this is the most

important step an institution can take to

facilitate an efficient evacuation. Nonetheless,

the real-time communication provided

by cell phones is invaluable—when the cell

phones work. “If I could wish for anything

it would be for institutions to require all

students to carry a cell phone [with international

coverage].”

At the same time, your communications

plan must be adaptable to a variety

of contingencies. Inés DeRomaña, principal

analyst, health, safety, and emergency

response with the University of Califor-

In July 2011, The Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC) partnered

with ConocoPhillips to host a conference on best practices for

contingency planning and evacuation, attended by more than 250

representatives from the U.S. private sector (including businesses,

colleges and universities, faith-based institutions, and nongovernmental

organizations). In November 2011, OSAC released a white paper summarizing

the firsthand experiences, advice, and lessons learned that

were shared during the conference. This report can be accessed on the

OSAC Web site under the “OSAC Publication” report type. You must be

a member of OSAC to access this report, but OSAC membership is free

to U.S. entities with legitimate commercial, educational, or humanitarian

activities abroad. See http://www.osac.gov for more information.

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nia Education Abroad Systemwide Office,

reports that 60 UC students and two UC

employees were impacted by the Chilean

earthquake in 2010. She explained that damage

to their facilities on site prevented the

faculty director from contacting the California

office, so the onsite program assistant

established a satellite office in her home to

centralize communications. “And then we

used everything—landlines, cell phones,

Facebook, Twitter, e-mail, etc., in order to

obtain and disseminate information.”

**Managing Disgruntled**

**Constituents**

A crisis management plan must also include

communication tips for managing

disgruntled constituents. Barbara Lindeman,

director of study abroad and assistant

director of the international center at the

University of Missouri, reflects that MU’s

protocols for evacuating students in cases

of epidemics or political unrest have worked

well. “However, not all of the students who

we evacuate are grateful and some are

angry—even if they were terrified beforehand.

It’s important to know that you and

your institution are doing the right thing for

students because sometimes crisis management

can be a thankless job.”

The Japan Center for Michigan Universities

(JCMU) experienced both ends of this

spectrum following its decision to end the

semester early after the reported malfunctions

at the Fukushima nuclear plant. Even

though the program’s location was far from

the nuclear reactors damaged in the earthquake

and tsunami, making it unlikely that

the students were in danger of exposure to

nuclear radiation, many parents expressed

appreciation to the university for taking

this precaution. Despite this, some parents

expressed anger and confusion over the decision

given that their students were in no

apparent danger. So as to maintain a level of

operational efficiency in the office, JCMU

staff had to prepare responses to complaints

as well as compliments. To streamline

communications, Kate Simon, program

coordinator with JCMU, reported that it

was helpful to have morning and afternoon

briefings with the staff, and to provide regular,

written summaries of the situation that

are also shared with staff unable to attend

the meeting—especially those on site.

Another lesson shared by Simon was that

once an organization makes a decision, less

information is more. “If you start to give out

a lot of information justifying the decision,

then you give people more to argue with or

to pick apart. You don’t need people questioning

the decision and trying to find fault

with it. If you are not firm, you can give the

impression that the decision is reversible,

and a lot of time is wasted hearing appeals.”

In other words, once a decision is made, be

clear and concise, but also unwavering.

**Insurance Coverage**

A comprehensive crisis management plan

ought to mirror or at least complement

your insurance coverage. While providing

education abroad participants with a comprehensive

medical treatment and medical

evacuation plan is fairly common, plans that

offer broader evacuation benefits like political/

security evacuation may exclude coverage

for natural disasters. Furthermore, even if

your coverage provides political/security

evacuation coverage, it may do so only if triggered

by a U.S. State Department (DOS)

Travel Warning. Yet waiting for DOS to issue

a warning before your institution recommends

leaving a country will likely make your

departure problematic. If your institution is

risk-averse, you should tend toward leaving

a potentially volatile location before transportation

options become limited. Insurance

carriers that offer evacuation services may be

able to respond quicker than the DOS with

regard to organizing departures. “Because we

are a private company we can be more proactive.

We don’t have the political pressures to

stand down,” states CISI’s Langin, adding, “In

my opinion, [the] State [Department] was 24

hours too late in issuing the Travel Warning

to Egypt.” Langin further described how CISI

personnel went into Cairo’s neighborhoods

and located every one of their clients’ students,

then arranged their transportation to

the airport, and shepherded them through security

and eventually onto a flight to Europe.

Once there, they worked with the students

and the institutions to fly them home or to

another university abroad where they had arranged

to transfer.

No crisis management plan should rely

solely on the U.S government for evacuation

as there is no guarantee of service.

U.S. government-sponsored flights out of

a foreign country are arranged at the discretion

of the DOS, and usually only when

capacity is lacking in the private sector or

commercial carriers have ceased operations

in the affected locations. It’s also important

to remember that the DOS has specific departure

classifications pertaining only to its

employees. An ordered departure, which

requires nonemergency personnel and eligible

family members, coincides with the

issuance of a Travel Warning, which for

many U.S. colleges and universities triggers

evacuation proceedings.

Complicating matters, U.S. citizens using

DOS services are responsible for getting

themselves to the airport. Tickets are also

issued based on priority according to the

following criteria: U.S. citizenship, tour/

study groups, and permanent residents

with clear ties to the United States. Efforts

are made to keep non-U.S. citizens traveling

with a group together, but no guarantees

can be made. Third-country nationals will

be offered seats on a space-available basis,

and dual passport holders are subject to the

directives of their own governments. Travelers

will also be required to sign a promissory

note for an undisclosed amount of money

What the U.S.

Department of State

Can and Can’t Do

in a Crisis:

http://travel.state.gov/travel/tips/

emergencies/emergencies\_1212.html

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but are told that the cost will be equivalent

to a one-way ticket to that destination on

commercial air. Such transport is also only

to the nearest safe haven, not “home.”

**Search and Rescue**

Another important service that can be provided

by an insurance provider is enhanced

search and rescue coverage. This was critical

in Haiti after a 7.0 magnitude devastated

the capital, Port-au-Prince, in January 2010.

While the affected government is generally

responsible for directing search and rescue

efforts, authorized assistance from other

entities is permitted particularly when the

affected government is underprepared for

a large-scale, long-term rescue operation

(as it was in Haiti). One of Langlin’s client

institutions had 14 students in Haiti at the

time of the disaster. Six were determined to

be in a hotel that collapsed. Langlin summarized

their resolve in such situations.

“Regardless of what the policy detail wording

says regarding search and rescue, we

are going to do the right thing. Search and

rescue operations were supposed to cease

after seven days. We stayed for 32—until

everyone was found.”

**Self-care**

A comprehensive crisis management plan

also promotes emotional and physical selfcare

for responders. MSU’s Office of Study

Abroad provided support to JCMU after

the March 2011 earthquake. Several days

into its response, an MSU employee turned

to Simon in a meeting to ask how she was

coping. She replied quietly, “I used to live

north of Sendai. I have no idea if anyone

I know is okay.” Stunned by this unknown

detail, she chided herself for not asking the

question sooner. Simon, like hundreds of

our education abroad colleagues around

the world—especially in Japan—put the

needs of her students before her own.

Senior staff needs to be as explicit as possible

in caring for their colleagues as much as their

students because when an individual or an

office goes into crisis management mode, it

is common to defer self-care. But an ongoing

crisis requires a staffing contingency plan, so

people can be allowed to rest, reflect, grieve,

and nourish their bodies. “Our colleagues

from Eastern Michigan University sent us a

fruit basket, which was so thoughtful, and

now we talk about how great it would be on

bad days to have a fruit basket,” joked Simon.

**Debrief**

The final element to a successful plan is reviewing

how it actually responded to the

crisis your institution just endured, and

revising the plan if deficiencies are found.

Within a week after the crisis is over, or as

soon as practicable, bring all responders

together to review key events and actions

taken, and how the plan responded. In planning

the meeting, take steps to ensure that

the tone of the meeting is not accusatory.

Make clear at the outset that the exercise is

not to criticize or cast blame, but to share in

a constructive way what went well and what

didn’t. Discussion may be heated and even

emotional, but if everyone understands that

the goal is to improve the institution’s response

to the next crisis and better protect

students, faculty, and others, participation

and open collaboration are ensured.

Of course, no matter how much experience

you have, managing a crisis will always

be stressful, but taking steps to review and

improve your plans will lessen your anxiety

and improve your performance. **IE**

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New Terms Replace

U.S. Department of State

“Warden Messages”

The U.S. Department of State is no longer using the term “Warden

Message.” The term “Warden Message” has been replaced by two

new classifications described below, “Message for U.S. Citizens”

and “Emergency Message for U.S. Citizens.”

■■ Embassies or Consulates will use a “Message for U.S. Citizens” to

disseminate information about routine topics such as voter registration,

income tax season, new passport procedures, and other non-security

issues of interest to the local U.S. citizen community.

■■ Embassies or Consulates will use an “Emergency Message for U.S. Citizens”

to inform U.S. citizens about events or threats that can affect their

personal security. This includes demonstrations, civil disturbances, natural

disasters, terrorist attacks, and other breaking events. Whenever the

Department of State revises the Worldwide Caution or issues a Travel Alert

or Travel Warning for a country or region, posts (embassies or consulates)

will also disseminate it with an Emergency Message for U.S. Citizens.

■■ The definitions for Travel Alerts and Travel Warnings have not changed

and can be found on their respective Web sites.

■■ Travel Alerts: http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis\_pa\_tw/pa/pa\_1766.html

■■ Travel Warnings: http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis\_pa\_tw/tw/tw\_1764.html

■■ Visit www.travel.state.gov for more about safety and security for traveling

U.S. citizens.